Henderson set to tackle head's challenge

New tennis, hockey and netball courts designed to encourage more participation COMING UP

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by Terry Maddaford — Nathan Calis

TOUCHDOWN: Epsom Girls' Corey Roberts scores a try during their match against St Kentigern.

A bespectacled 50-something headmaster hardly rates as the next Rafael Nadal but for the kids at Henderson High the challenge is very real.
''Beat me on the tennis court and I'll shout you lunch,'' is the incentive for 650 or so students at the West Auckland secondary school to upstage their boss Mike Purcell.
Getting the new all-weather courts completed comes first but by term two that will be a reality.

As part of an ambitious project led by Purcell, the decile-four school is spending big on providing much needed, and keenly awaited sporting facilities.
As part of the more than $2 million development, the school will soon boast an international-class water-based hockey turf— a first in that part of the city — four tennis and three netball courts. It is all part of Purcell's push to lift participation levels across the sporting spectrum from around 20-25 per cent to 70-80 per cent.

‘‘That is my aim over the next five years,’’ said Purcell, 57, who has been at the school for less than a term. ‘‘Learning is not a spectator sport. There is ample evidence that physical activity influences academic performance.’’

Purcell, formerly at Karamu College, another co-educational school with a similar role and decile rating in the Hawkes Bay, took up his new position after a couple of years overseas. ‘‘Sport at Henderson High is at a fairly basic level but already with the activity surrounding these new facilities there has been a huge increase in sporting interest,’’ said Purcell, a former rugby representative and more than useful tennis player who now plays at Royal Oak.

His pupils have about six weeks to prepare to battle their principal as Purcell estimates the courts will by then be ready for action.
The netball courts, too, are being readied for play with that sport set to blossom with the new facility.
‘‘We certainly want to grow netball just as we plan to do with hockey,’’ said Purcell, who has watched what was just a grassed area being developed as a top-class sporting facility by using allocated property funding.

Black Sticks coach Shane McLeod is impressed by the effort being made at the school.
‘‘Sport was a significant factor in driving me to achieve and I constantly see the positive correlation between sport and academic achievement in the younger players,’’ said McLeod, who in an earlier life was a schoolteacher. ‘‘They become focused and determined to do their best as they work to balance academic and training demands.
McLeod and some of his New Zealand players will be at the school to inspect the West’s first international standard turf tomorrow.

The new surface will also be home to the fledgling Waitakere Hockey Club who have entered three men’s and two women’s teams in this season’s Auckland competition and plan to add junior teams in future.